

*Integrative Service Project Summary Submitted to the University of Utah in  
Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the Service Learning Scholars'  
Program through the Lowell Bennion Community Service Center  
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Joel Arvizo, faculty Advisor, Department of Educational Leadership and Policy

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Zach Bale, Community Representative, Division Director of Outreach Services

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Jane Lilly, Bennion Center Representative, Service Learning Scholar Coordinator

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Dacia Holladay, Student

## Abstract

The experience of homelessness is much like the long hallway that stretches between infinite numbers of inaccessible doorways. Access to education and educational support and resources is among the myriad closed doors that one might encounter while walking this path. The homeless youth of downtown Salt Lake City that acquire many needed resources from the Homeless Youth Resource Center are heavily challenged in their educational goals as they must continually approach doorways leading into rooms that did not include their unique circumstances in their structural design. The objective for my Integrated Service Project was to understand the educational needs and wants of the youth of the Homeless Youth Resource Center and the educational alternatives available in the community in order to develop educational resources designed around the unique experiences and challenges of homelessness.

Through the research conducted for the project, it was determined that in order to meet the specific circumstances of students experiencing homelessness, the final product needed to effectively provide one-on-one support to students in an openly structured program. Students that obtain educational support and resources through the Homeless Youth Resource Center are currently provided instruction and support through an open ended pre-GED, GED, and high-school completion program that allows students to complete work and make progress at the rate that they are able given both their skill level and life circumstances. Therefore, tutors/mentors that could contribute supplementary instruction and support to the core program would provide students with a greater ability to progress according to his or her skills, abilities, and circumstances. After exploring various methods of developing a tutoring/mentoring program that

could accommodate an increased level of one-on-one support for students, a tutoring/mentoring AmeriCorps position was determined to be the best initial approach to providing the Homeless Youth Resource Center's educational programming with additional resources. The program will be facilitated by both University of Utah students through the Bennion Center's volunteer programs, the University of Utah's AmeriCorps program, and the staff of the Homeless Youth Resource Center. The goal is to develop a continuous, self-sustaining partnership through which the unique circumstances, needs, and goals of the Homeless Youth Resource Center staff and participants are met and the needs and goals of University of Utah student participants are met through working together.

## Review of Literature

It was an imperative of this project to create a space that was interwoven with the strengths and voices of the youth and university students which the program would serve. *Community-Based Research and Higher Education* and *Community Building in the Twenty-first Century*, were the dominant texts that I utilized in the research and development phase of the project. The values, methods, principles, and research practices discussed in these texts outline a realistic approach to a collaborative process that produces research that is rooted in a conception of participatory knowledge creation. This validation of community knowledge was an essential component of a research process that would provide the information necessary to determine what the most effective resources that a partnership between the University of Utah and Homeless Youth Resource Center would be for youth working to obtain their high school diploma or equivalency.

The texts that were fundamental to the development and creation of the tutoring/mentoring program included, *Helping Homeless Students* written by Elizabeth Mizarek, et.al., for Principal Leadership magazine and *How to Start and Sustain a Volunteer Tutor/Mentor Program*, provided by the Tutor Mentor Institute. These texts provided the basic knowledge necessary to formulate a realistic model for the program as well information and resources pertinent to the development of materials for future volunteers of the program.

In addition to these texts, the concepts articulated in Julio Cammarota and Michelle Fine's, *Revolutionizing Education* as well as Richard Valencia's, *The Evolution of Deficit Thinking; Educational Thought and Practice* provided a conceptual framework for the process in which participatory and reciprocal partnerships yielded greater overall resources for marginalized individuals through using community strengths and realities to affect needed change and create access to needed resources.

Non-traditional research texts were as well beneficial to the process. For example, the unique educational experiences narrated in; Cherie Moraga's, *La Guera*, Sherman Alexie's, the *Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, and Marie Hara's, *Fourth Grade Ukus*, facilitated an understanding of the educational experiences specific to different minoritized groups and thus influenced an understanding and awareness of the diverse experiences and challenges of the individuals that comprise the Homeless Youth Resource Center community.

### Procedure

The research method employed was centered on the guiding concepts of a community-based research model. This approach had as its focus a collaborative process that produces

research that is rooted in a conception of participatory knowledge creation. Surveys, a focus group, and interviews were conducted with the youth of the Homeless Youth Resource Center, Salt Lake Community College, Horizonte and other alternative education programs to pinpoint needs and identify possible partnerships. This model of ascertaining community need through community knowledge was an essential component of the process of determining how best to accommodate the youth utilizing the Homeless Youth Resource Center's educational programs. The research process also included obtaining critical information about how to develop effective tutoring/mentoring programs and the challenges particular to working with youth experiencing homelessness through a review of pertinent literature, scholarly journals, and on-line resources.

## Results

As the needs of the community and potential community partnerships were identified, the program model best suited to both variables was determined to be four tutoring/mentoring AmeriCorps Positions through the Bennion Center's AmeriCorps program. As an initial approach to an educational partnership between the University of Utah and the Homeless Youth Resource Center, this structure was identified to be the most practical and achievable resource due to the mutual benefit afforded by the AmeriCorps program as well as the versatility and opportunity for leadership development that it allows its volunteers. During the course of service the tutor will assist students receiving services from the Homeless Youth Resource Center in achieving their general education degree (GED) or high school diploma by meeting them on a regular basis to provide support with learning required subject matter, learning challenges, and the development of good study skills. The tutor will also provide information and general guidance for students interested in higher education. Compensation will be provided to the tutors

in the form of an education award received at the completion of the term of service through the AmeriCorps program. Tutors will work closely with the Homeless Youth Resource Center's education program staff in order to effectively provide services to students in need of support. The tutors/mentors hours will be verified by the education program's supervisor and reported back to the Bennion Center's AmeriCorps program director on a monthly basis.

### Reflection

The work that I have done for my integrated service project has been in many ways some of the most difficult yet important work that I have done throughout my college degree. I began my project the summer of 2009 while sitting under a giant oak tree during a break from the work that I was doing that day as a tutor at the Neighborhood House. While fuming about the reality of educational injustice for so many minoritized populations, I realized that in order to quell my frustrations I needed to act in some way to alleviate some of the injustice that I perceived. Creating a program that would provide youth that experience homelessness with greater educational opportunities and support was the fairly immediate answer to my realization. I did not know where or how to begin or what I exactly needed to do-so I just dove right in.

Looking back now I realize that diving right in was what allowed me to learn so much about the process of community development, but had I known the frustrations and struggles that I would have to face in taking on this journey, I think I may have taken a different route. The truth is, however, that there was no other way-I had to let my heart and my desperate need to act in the face of injustice drive me and guide me.

Have I arrived? No. There is still so much work to be done. All of the year's work has been a learning, molding process which has lead to now- the time to enact and put into motion everything that I have brought together throughout the journey. What the project is now, of course, is not the grand idea that it began as but a more humble reality that shaped itself according to the needs of the community and my abilities as a service learning scholar. Will it succeed? Will it sustain and evolve and ultimately create a more just reality for youth that experience homelessness in Salt Lake City? I ask myself these questions all the time and wrestle with the only answer I have, which is- I do not know. But what I do hope is that every small movement in the right direction affects a collective shift towards the world that I wanted so badly to realize beneath the shade of that oak tree in that summer before I learned that change is sometimes slow but so profoundly attainable.

## Appendix

“We are not lost we know where we are but our itinerary is  
chance and weather.

We do not believe in destinations and we are in no hurry.

We have learned patience  
from statues in a thousand parks  
and joy  
from days without collars.”

-anonymous homeless youth (<http://www.voaut.org/Default.aspx?tabid=2373>)



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